To the Members of the Congregation of the Mission
Some Hopes for the World-Wide Congregation¹

The prophet Joel tells us that young men will see visions and old men will dream dreams (Jl 3:1).

As brothers in the Congregation, I hope that we can dream the same dreams so that together we can bring them about. Let me share with you some of my hopes for the Congregation over the next several years.

1. I would like to see the Congregation of the Mission, as a whole, grow to be much more missionary, mobile, flexible, responsive to the needs of the world-wide Church.

To that end, as you know, I made appeals in October 1992 and 1993 for volunteers for the missions. I was delighted with the response. We have begun new missions in Albania, Tanzania, the Solomon Islands, China, Bolivia, and a new territory in Mozambique. We have also strengthened significantly the Province of Cuba and the Vice-Province of Mozambique.

Next year we hope to focus on the Ukraine and parts of Eastern Europe as well as reinforcing the missions in Tanzania and Bolivia.

I want to say publicly that the confreres have been most generous in their response to my appeal and that the Visitors as a whole have been wonderfully cooperative and supportive.

But this renewed flexibility involves not only the willingness of Confreres to go to new, unknown places. It involves a supple mentality in regard to evangelization itself. Today more than ever we are conscious that lay people have an essential role in announcing the good news.² One of the principal tasks of the priests and brothers of the Congregation is to form lay people to participate more fully in the evangelization of the poor (C 1).

¹ Updated version of a talk to Vincentian confreres at an ongoing formation session in Paris, August 16, 1993.
² Christifideles Laici, 7.
2. I would like to see all the Confreres of the Congregation engaged actively in on-going Vincentian formation.

All our recent documents emphasize the need for on-going formation. The Constitutions affirm that formation in the Congregation is a life-long process (C 77).

The last four General Assemblies have discussed it at length. The most recent Assembly states that "the Congregation and each Province should be committed to putting in place as soon as possible plans for ongoing formation, which will be paths of conversion that can lead Confreres to deepen their Vincentian charism and vocation and acquire the competency required by new evangelization."³

To that end, we have established an International Center for On-going Vincentian Formation in Paris with a team whose members come from various continents.

This project has been greeted with warm enthusiasm not only in Paris, where it has brought about considerable change in the life of the Mother House, but by the Visitors as a whole, whom we consulted about it.

Each year we will sponsor two four-month programs. Two groups of thirty to fifty Confreres will take part in them. We hope to offer a program of integral formation, embracing the various aspects of Vincentian life: our heritage, our spirituality, apostolic life, community life, human development.

3. I would hope that the Congregation could open several significant works among the clergy.

We receive many requests, particularly from Africa and Asia. Flexibility is crucial in our response to these requests.

The new mission that we are undertaking in the Solomon Islands involves the opening of a seminary. The mission in Tanzania has possible links with formation in that country too. The appeals that we have received from Russia and China, moreover, are also linked to our involvement in the training of priests.

One of the principal problems we face, however, is that those who have been trained for formation work come, for the most part, from other cultures and speak other languages. Is there sufficient flexibility within

the Congregation to make the adaptation that is necessary if we are to respond to the appeals that we receive? I think so, but we will have to work hard at it.

Beyond these appeals from Africa, Asia, and sometimes Latin America, within each culture we must ask ourselves: What are the deepest needs of the clergy today here and now? Can we Vincentians minister to those needs in some significant way?

4. I would hope that the Congregation could respond to Pope John Paul's call to us "to search out more than ever, with boldness, humility and skill, the causes of poverty and encourage short- and long-term solutions."

Some of our provinces, because of their very significant resources, particularly in the universities, can be an effective instrument in responding to that call. For example, St. John's University in New York City has just established a Social Justice Chair.

Along the same lines, I would hope that many individual Confreres would develop an expertise in regard to the social teaching of the Church (§ 11 §3) and would develop effective methods of communicating it.

Do the diocesan priests whom we train come to sense that Vincentians are "experts" in the social teaching of the Church, and do they leave our seminaries well prepared to share it with others?

5. I would hope that the Congregation could develop prayer forms which are "something beautiful for God" and attractive to the young. What do I mean concretely when I say this?

My experience in several years of visiting the provinces is that our common prayer leaves much to be desired. It is often far from beautiful, far from attractive to young people. On the other hand, I have visited new communities whose prayer is strikingly beautiful and to which young people flock.

In a revision of our prayer, I would envision:

a. a form of morning and evening prayer adapting the structure of the breviary to our own tradition (one could also think of having this approved by the Church, if that seemed advisable)

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* using a modified cycle of psalms that might be grouped around certain themes linked with our tradition and the needs of the universal Church

* using some readings from Saint Vincent

* providing time for meditation and sharing after the readings

* modifying the petitions to focus on some of our Vincentian concerns

* integrating some of our traditional prayers, like the De Profundis and the Expectatio Israel

b. models for sharing our faith and our prayer, as recommended in article 46 of our Constitutions

* meditating on readings from Saint Vincent and then sharing our thoughts, as in a above

* meditating on the Sunday readings and preparing the Sunday homily together

* some form of revision de vie

c. a compendium of Vincentian hymns, of revised Vincentian prayers

d. suggestions as to ways in which our Vincentian prayer would be open to others

We have named an international committee, which has had two meetings in recent months and is developing a book of prayer for the Congregation.

6. I would hope that we can develop renewed forms of community living.

My concern is this: In recent years, it seems to me, we have been able to find a considerable number of renewed, creative ways of serving the poor. But, along with many other Congregations, we have had much difficulty in finding ways of significantly renewing our community living.

Many of the practices and structures that gave shape to community living in an earlier era have disappeared. In the majority of cases, we could surely not now return to those same structures. Most of them served their purpose in their own time, but gradually became over-formalized, inflexible, and out-dated. Still, they often aimed at values that have abiding
validity: unity with one another, common vision and energy in the apostolate, prayer, revision de vie, penance and conversion.

With the passing away of former practices, we have not yet, unfortunately, come up with sufficient contemporary means for forming “New Communities.”

What do I envision might be some elements toward a solution?

One of the principal means that our Constitutions propose for the building up of a living community is the local community plan (C 27). This plan is, in a sense, a covenant entered into by the members of the local community, by which they pledge to work toward certain common goals and engage in certain common practices. It is to include: apostolic activity, prayer, the use of goods, Christian witness where we work, on-going formation, times for group reflection, necessary time for relaxation and study, and an order of day. It is to be evaluated and revised periodically (S 16).

Beyond this legislated structure, our experience too, both in the past and in the present, teaches that some of the means that have been most highly valued in community-building are: communal prayer, faith-sharing, regular meetings, meals together, simplicity in the use of material goods, communal penance, times of relaxing together.

But often the concrete forms for revitalizing these means are lacking in local communities. To find or create those forms we need creativity, the ability to listen to each other, and fidelity to the common plans we agree on.

In some ways I find this the most difficult of the challenges to come to grips with.

7. I would hope that the Congregation will develop active, vital contact with the various Vincentian lay groups and that we will be able to contribute to their formation, as has often been requested of us.

There are between 1 and 2 million people in our lay groups. That makes for quite a large Vincentian family! There are more than 240,000 members of the A.I.C. (International Association of Charity), the group Saint Vincent called the Ladies of Charity. There are more than 850,000 members of the Vincent de Paul Society in more than 122 countries. Besides that, there are very numerous Vincentian Youth groups. The one in Spain has at least 30,000 members.

Our Constitutions call us to be involved in the formation of the Laity
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and to assist them toward a fuller participation in the evangelization of the poor (C 1). Are we actively involved with these lay groups? Do we play a significant role in their formation?

8. I would hope that the Congregation would learn to use the media effectively in its evangelization.

Is this a vain hope? Maybe. But I think we should give it a try! There are countless documents on the need to use the media in evangelization, catechesis, teaching. Catholics were certainly pioneers in the use of television as a tool for ministry. Most of us remember the days when everybody (Catholic and non-Catholic) was glued to the TV to watch Bishop Sheen.

Since that time, however, we have made little progress. Evangelical groups now certainly outshine us in the use of the media. Even more significantly, those who have values contrary to the Gospel use the media very effectively to communicate their point of view. They consistently communicate the need to have more, the need for immediate gratification. They communicate a concept of love that is frequently overly romantic, overly casual, and quite irresponsible.

If we were half as effective in using the media to communicate the values that are most important to us, we would make enormous progress in the new evangelization.

We have named an international committee with members from five continents to suggest ways in which the Congregation can use the media more effectively.

Those are my hopes. Will you join me in making them become a reality?
Toward a New Evangelization
Reflections on the Congregation of the Mission

In times of renewal, "young men see visions and old men dream dreams," the prophet Joel tells us (cf. JI 3:1; also Acts 2:17). Today I ask the Lord to stimulate all of us to new dreams and to new efforts at making them come true.

Toward a New Evangelization

Pope John Paul II has made the expression "new evangelization" part of the contemporary Catholic vocabulary. Few topics have received more attention in the Church in recent years. He speaks of an evangelization that is new in its ardor, in its methods and in its expression.

But John Paul II's teaching has many antecedents over the last several decades. Noteworthy among these is John XXIII's opening address at the Second Vatican Council, where he called for a new expression of the Christian faith:

"The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another."

In the same discourse he also stated: "At the same time she [the Church] must ever look to the present, to the new conditions and new forms of life introduced into the modern world which have opened new avenues."

The Medellín document, which had dramatic effects in Latin America,

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2. Discourse at the 19th Ordinary Assembly of CELAM, Haiti, March 9, 1983; also, in the Dominican Republic, October 12, 1984.
4. Ibid., 714.
called for a re-evangelization of human existence (VIII, 8). It envisioned a Latin American Church that would be an Evangelizer of the Poor, committed to living in solidarity with them (XIV, 8). The final document at Puebla continued this analysis of a renewed evangelization (340f). The Santo Domingo document, building on the experience of two decades, provides an extensive development of the contents of “new evangelization” (Conclusions 23ff).

Almost all commentators agree that Paul IV, while not using the term “new evangelization” is one of its principal architects. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* provides some of the richest source materials for the new evangelization:

> Evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed, if it does not use their language, their signs and symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask, and if it does not have an impact on their concrete life. (#63)

Naturally, like many popular expressions, “new evangelization” has taken on a variety of meanings. Also, some controversy has arisen over the terms “new evangelization” or “re-evangelization,” the role of the charismatic movement in the process of “new evangelization,” the relationship in the past between “evangelization” and “colonization.” Leaving aside these controversies for now, today I want to focus on the positive implications of a new evangelization.

### Some Reactions

“Nothing is new”

Of course, there are those who, like Qoheleth, feel that nothing is new under the sun (Eccl 1:9). There is a hidden truth in this assertion, but one that needs to be balanced by another truth. The New Testament provides a basis for those holding this position. “Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb 13:8). The fullness of revelation has broken into history in the person of Jesus and the announcement of the reign of God. So, “guard the deposit of faith” (2 Tim 1:14). “If I preach any other gospel, let me be anathema” (Gal 1:8).

This fundamental stance emphasizes the already, sometimes at the
expense of the not yet. It accents the basic creed, while being slow to acknowledge that there is development in credal statements.

"Everything is new"

Some are always in process. They are uneasy with the stable, the structured, the given. They are eager for the old things to pass away and for the new to emerge.

There are ample grounds for this position in the New Testament. “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2 Cor 5:17). “Behold, all things are new” (2 Cor 5:17). “I will create a new heaven and a new earth” (Is 65:17; cf. Rev 21:1). The good news is news.

This fundamental stance emphasizes the not yet, sometimes at the expense of the already. It accents the Church as mystery, as fathomless, as always revealing the inexhaustible riches of Christ. It cites the many historical instances of development of doctrine. It focuses today on the continually changing interface of Christ and culture.

Of course, the truth lies in a tension between these two views. As Matthew’s gospel reminds us: “The wise steward brings forth from his storehouse new things and old” (Mt 13:52).

“What is really new?”

In his discourse given in Santo Domingo on October 12, 1984, Pope John Paul speaks of an evangelization that is new in its:

Ardor

Here the emphasis is on the conversion of the evangelizer. “We have found the Messiah, the Christ,” the disciples cry out in John’s gospel (1:41). Only someone who knows the Lord and loves him deeply can proclaim the word of God with joy, enthusiasm, conviction.

There are many ways of conversion. The focus in new evangelization is not on any particular path, like that of the charismatic movement, of the neo-catechumenate, or of any new form of community springing up in the Church, though many are in fact converted in and through new communities. One must surely be converted. Finding the way is the challenge.

In this light, the new evangelization raises a series of questions for us. Have I really found a way of conversion myself? Has the Congregation as a whole been genuinely converted? Has live contact with the poor been
for us, as it was for Saint Vincent, the path to conversion? Have the poor revealed to us how God sees the world’s priorities?

Methods

There are many new means at hand. They too pose enormously challenging questions to us.

Do many in the Church, or the Congregation, really use the mass media (TV, radio, movies, the press) as a means for evangelizing? Are there many provinces that have trained even one person in the use of the media and have organized one good media project? Do many in the Congregation use computers to full advantage in pastoral activities?

In our pastoral methodology, do we work not only for the poor, but with them? Do we regard base communities as a peculiar Latin American thing, or do we work at forming Christian communities wherever we evangelize?

Expression

Every era and every place has its own language and culture or, better, its own languages and cultures. Today, differences in culture pose an increasing challenge, since we live in an information society, where rapid communication brings us into contact with the global community.

In the Church, we live in an ecumenical era. In philosophy and theology, hermeneutics play a very significant role. There is strong emphasis on the need for the inculturation of theology.

In fact, in contemporary Church documents, there are some accents that are quite new. Not that they have never existed before; you can find most of them, at least in some form, in the Fathers of the Church. But as the Church interfaces with contemporary societies and cultures, there is a new emphasis on:

— the preferential option for the poor
— the effects of sin on social structures
— the systemic aspects of justice and injustice
— life issues (war, peace-making, abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment)
— the erosion of family structures and sexual morality
— integral liberation
— ecology.
Beyond these new emphases in Church documents and contemporary theology, one can also discern in our 1984 Constitutions and in the official documents of the Congregation in recent years a number of significantly new accents:

- on Christ as the Evangelizer of the Poor
- on the link between evangelization and action for justice
- on searching out the causes of poverty and concrete solutions
- on specializing in the Church’s social teaching
- on investigating the new forms of poverty
- on being evangelized by the poor
- on the poor as not merely the object of evangelization, but its subject
- on forming basic Christian communities
- on a global world-view.

A Description of Evangelization and Some Critical Distinctions

As a basis for the reflections that follow, I offer you this description of evangelization used by Paul VI in Evangelii Nuntiandi:

Evangelization is a complex process made up of varied elements: the renewal of humanity, witness, explicit proclamation, inner adherence, entry into the community, acceptance of signs, apostolic initiative. These elements may appear to be contradictory, indeed mutually exclusive. In fact they are complementary and mutually enriching. Each one must always be seen in relationship with the others. (#24)

From the writings of Paul VI and John Paul II, it is evident that evangelization has many facets, all of which play a significant role in the overall picture. Within that context, let me highlight two critical distinctions that play a significant role in describing evangelization in the Vincentian tradition:
Evangelizing "by word and work"; serving "spiritually and corporally"

Saint Vincent was deeply convinced of the link between what we say and what we do. Again and again, therefore, he spoke of evangelization by "word and work." He calls both the Vincentians and Daughters of Charity to serve the poor "spiritually and corporally." When speaking to the members of the Congregation, he warned us:

If there are any among us who think they are in the Congregation of the Mission to preach the gospel to the poor but not to comfort them, to supply their spiritual but not their temporal wants, I reply that we ought to assist them and have them assisted in every way, by ourselves and by others.... To do this is to preach the gospel by words and by works. (SV XII, 87)

He tells the Daughters of Charity again and again that their works must be accompanied by words of faith.5

First, do; then, teach. That is Saint Vincent's rule for "effective" evangelization. In other words, Saint Vincent sees preaching and human promotion as complementary to one another, and as integral to the evangelization process.

Direct and indirect evangelization

Neither Saint Vincent nor the history of the Congregation provide any grounds for a fundamentalism in regard to evangelization of the poor. Saint Vincent clearly recognized that not all could serve the poor directly and that some would necessarily serve them indirectly. He handled this dispute in his own lifetime. As examples, he cites seminary teachers and directors of the Daughters of Charity. He saw their role as necessary if the poor were to be served well. There will always be similar cases.

There is a need for caution in using the direct/indirect distinction. It must be evoked with great moderation. Unless a very large number of our members is involved in direct evangelization we will hardly merit the name "missionaries."

5. SV IX, 59; IX, 593; XI, 364; XI, 592.
Toward a New Evangelization in the Congregation of the Mission

Our most recent General Assembly calls the Congregation to make six commitments:

1. **Remembering that Saint Vincent’s encounter with the poor was a decisive factor in his life, we will have personal contact with people whom our society has disinherited and abandoned.**

   This is the peculiarly Vincentian way of conversion. It is not the only one, of course. But it is the way that Saint Vincent trod and the way in which he calls the Company to walk. If the new evangelization is one that is to be new in its ardor, then it must rest upon the foundation of a genuine conversion.

   Let me simply add here that the controlling spiritual force that will enable us to live out this first commitment of the General Assembly is the lived conviction that we who are Vincentians follow Christ as the Evangelizer of the Poor. Focus on, and commitment to, this Christ is the heart of Vincentian spirituality.

   Is it really possible for everyone to have first-hand contact with the poor? Certainly not everyone can have as his principal ministry one which brings him into direct contact with the poor. The Superior General is one example of this. But I would suggest that for most of us it is possible to have at least some direct contact, even if not every day.

2. **Recognizing the complexity of our world today, we will investigate and urge others to study the root causes of poverty in order ‘to promote long- and short-term solutions, which are concrete, flexible and efficacious.’**

   The direct/indirect distinction comes into play here. Does one do more good by ministering directly to the hungry person, giving him food, or by investigating the causes of famine and working toward a resolution of the problem? The pope calls on us as Vincentians to use our gifts not only in direct service to the poor, but also in the kind of indirect service that will be even more beneficial in the long run.

   The Congregation can play a very significant role here. We have

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6. Address of John Paul II to the delegates at the General Assembly of 1986.
formidable educational and financial resources for investigating the causes of poverty. Recently, I met with the presidents of three of our Vincentian-sponsored universities to encourage them to mobilize the energies of their faculties, staff, and students to study the root causes of poverty and search for solutions.

In our preaching, we can also encourage others to develop a global world-view, and challenge them to make their own an ethic in which justice is a foundation stone.

Are there ways in which we can engage in a critique of contemporary society from the point of view of justice? Anyone living in Italy, as I do, is very conscious today of the need to evangelize economic and political life, since gospel values and ethical values have given way to wholesale corruption. The same is true in many countries.

This kind of critical, prophetic role of the Church and of theology creates a new relationship between the Church and the world, not one of alliance with the powerful, but one of solidarity with the oppressed and defense of the rights of the poor.

3. We will give a privileged place in our own formation and in the formation of priests and laity to a spirit of dialogue and collaboration with contemporary society, in the light of the social teaching of the Church. The goal will be to promote creative solidarity in favor of the poor, who long for their own liberation and personal well-being.

I want to make three points in this regard:

a. The General Assembly speaks of dialogue with contemporary society. I hereby appeal to all candidates for the Congregation, and as many members as possible, to become bilingual. Dialogue and mobility in contemporary society demand it. In the United States, for example, almost fifty percent of the Catholics do not speak English as their first language. Spanish has become an essential tool for a missionary there.

Saint Vincent felt strongly about the need to learn other languages. He told the confreres:

Now the diversity of languages is very great, not only in Europe, Africa and Asia, but also in Canada. For we see by the reports of the Jesuit Fathers that there are as many languages as there are tribes. The Hurons do not speak like the Iroquois, nor the latter like their neighbors. And a person who
understands one group of Indians does not understand the others.
How then can Missionaries, bearing these differences of language in mind, go throughout the world announcing the Gospel if they know only their own language? (SV XII, 26-27)

b. The statement also speaks of the social teaching of the Church. Are there ways in which not just our educational institutions, but all of us, can communicate the Church’s social doctrine more effectively. Pope John Paul II writes very forcefully in Centesimus Annus: “The ‘new evangelization’ which the modern world urgently needs and which I have emphasized many times, must include among its essential elements a proclamation of the Church’s social doctrine” (#5). The Church has been proclaiming this doctrine in a rather clear way now for more than one hundred years. Are Catholics really well evangelized in this regard? Is this social doctrine part of their explicit consciousness? Are we Vincentians “experts” in teaching this social doctrine?

c. Do the clergy and laity in whose formation we assist really become “experts” in the Church’s social doctrine? Do they look back on their Vincentian teachers and directors with gratitude for having moved them to drink deeply from this rich source?

4. We will give to all our pastoral activity a clear missionary character, attending to the most abandoned and marginalized and fostering the effective participation of everyone in the life of the Christian community. We will be ready to hand our work over to others when we consider our mission completed.

The key here is mobility. The missionary’s goal is the formation of new or renewed local communities. He is aware that there are “other villages where the gospel must be preached” (cf. Mk 1:38) and that therefore his time commitment in a given place is limited. When the Christian community is self-sufficient, the missionary moves on.

The statement speaks of the effective participation of everyone in the life of the Christian community. Today we are aware that the poor are not just the object of evangelization, but its subject. The poor themselves evangelize. Our evangelization is with and for them.

Consequently, the new evangelization calls for a new way of being for the missionary. His ministry is characterized by community-building, by
the active participation of all, by the distribution of functions, by the emergence of new ministries and charisms, by solidarity with the oppressed.7

I must raise a question here that pertains to Vincentians in many parts of the world. There are now hundreds of thousands of basic Christian communities throughout the world. More and more in these communities, the gospel is read together and meditated on, interpreted in an environment of prayer and communal sharing, and lived in relationship to the problems within the people’s culture. Has this mode of evangelization been sufficiently explored and put into practice in the Congregation?

What is being described here, in the second, third, and fourth commitments cited above, is a very demanding pastoral methodology, which had already been outlined in the 1990 document “Visitors in Service of the Mission” (p. 16):

* to work within the world of the poor (the poor as a class), not just with isolated persons (Lines of Action 1986, 4 and 11);

* to work on the level of structures, not just in responding to particular situations (Lines of Action 1986, 6 and 11);

* to work to confront injustice, not just to meet the needs of individual poor people (Lines of Action 1986, 4 and 11);

* to work with groups (small communities), so that the poor person is an agent, and not simply an object, of evangelization (Lines of Action 1986, 4 and 11).

5. We will foster the work of the popular missions and the missions ad gentes, working for the creation, the growth and the maturity of Christian communities, which will be both evangelized and evangelizing and which will promote the integral development of persons.

Centesimus Annus puts the challenge very clearly:

Present circumstances are leading to a reaffirmation of the positive value of an authentic theology of integral human liberation. (#26)

7. Leonardo Boff, Nova Evangelização. Perspectiva dos Oprimidos (Fortaleza: Vozes, 1990) 122-26. In this very interesting work, the author also mentions new contents in the new evangelization: a new kind of spirituality, a new relationship of the Church with the world. In regard to method, he focuses especially on the poor as the subject of evangelization.
Integral development and integral liberation are two key phrases in our own documents and in those of Pope John Paul II. Integral human liberation embraces all the aspects of people’s lives: personal, social, intellectual, affective, cultural, religious.

Renewed popular missions and missions *ad gentes* will develop new methods for fostering integral liberation, a new pedagogy that is adapted to the oppressed, where the educator and those being educated learn mutually, where we not only evangelize but are evangelized by the poor.

As in Jesus’ ministry, so also in the new evangelization there will also be new recipients of evangelization: the culture, popular religiosity, marginalized women, prostitutes, street people, AIDS victims, those without housing.

6. *Our Congregation commits itself in Eastern Europe to at least one missionary project as a concrete sign of our community’s participation in new evangelization.*

As you know, we sent three missionaries to Albania last year and two more this year (there are also three groups of Daughters of Charity). Although one hears less of Albania, it is probably the poorest country in all of Europe. Nothing functions and nothing is available. The economic and political structure of the country was utterly devastated during the years of communist domination.

We now also have missionaries working in the Ukraine, in Byelorussia, and Lithuania. We hope to send more.

Let me conclude by asking these fundamental questions. Can the Church, as it commits itself to a new evangelization, really become a Church of the poor, as Pope John XXIII called it to be in his opening address at Vatican II? Will we, the members of the Congregation of the Mission, really be followers of Christ as the Evangelizer of the Poor, as our Constitutions call us to be? Will our provinces really be communities of priests and brothers evangelizing the poor and leading others to evangelize them, as their apostolic plans envision? The answer can surely be yes to all these questions.

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On Being a Missionary Today\(^1\)

I ask you today, my brothers, to join me in reflecting on our name. We are members of the Congregation of the *Mission*. Saint Vincent reminds us that people from the earliest times, spontaneously called us “the *missionaries*” (cf. SV III, 356). The Lord sends us out. Our vocation is not to remain fixed in a single place, to sink permanent roots. Jesus speaks to us as he did to his disciples at the end of Mark’s gospel: “Go! Go into the whole world and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mk 16:15).

Mission is not merely an activity of the Church; it is its very being. Over the course of history the Church has used different images of mission.\(^2\) If one thinks of the “reign of God” as the New Testament fundamental image describing God’s advent in the world through the person of Jesus, then “*mission*” is the image used to describe the Church’s role in spreading that reign.\(^3\) As an image, “*mission*” has had different resonances in different eras.

Mission as *crusade* looks at the world as divided between good and evil, true and false. There is an atmosphere of conquest. In the best of times the conquest is primarily spiritual, but sometimes it has been quite mixed up with economic, political, and cultural power.

Mission as *teaching* focuses on faith as a creed or a body of truths that is to be communicated. There is a stress on knowledge and the use of preaching, teaching, writing, and the media for the communication of revealed truth.

Mission as a *call to conversion* stresses the need for personal change of heart. Each individual is called to be born again in response to a personal and moral challenge. Conversion is seen as a profound personal experience.

Mission as *liberation* aims at the transformation of life starting here

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On Being a Missionary Today

and now, though it is not limited to the present. It promotes healing, development, and justice, as the reign of God comes to be realized.

Mission as witness focuses on Christian life as a silent but active presence in the midst of a hostile world. The Church lives as a leaven in the diaspora. The minister builds up model communities of service and fellowship.

Mission as inculcation evokes the need for Christianity to become incarnate in a particular culture. The gospel interfaces with local cultural, purifying it and at the same time incorporating its riches, maintaining a unity of meaning within a plurality of expressions.

Mission as dialogue recognizes other religions as positive elements in God’s saving plan. One sees in them the hidden or preparatory activity of the Spirit. The Church in that context is seen as fulfillment, explicitation, or sacramental fullness.

Mission as pilgrimage envisions walking with God and with others in the fulfillment of God’s plan for the universe, where God’s action is mixed up with human imperfection and sinfulness. It envisions the Church as existing for the world, called to animate a movement of peoples toward the realization of God’s reign, which is both historical and eschatological.

Mission as prophecy radicalizes the proclamation of the good news as it confronts the deficiencies of human cultures and oppressive structures. It seeks to transform culture, to be critical of the easy legitimations of religion, and to challenge the oppressive economico-political and socio-cultural structures.

All of these images tell us something about mission. They all have their strengths and weaknesses. Each has time-conditioned elements. Each contains an abiding truth. While some (e.g., the image of crusade) are much more time-conditioned than others, we can learn from them all. In fact, each provides abundant material for meditation.

What then does it mean to be a missionary today? This is a crucial question for us, since it touches on our identity. There is no doubt about our calling: we are members of the Congregation of the Mission.

Some Characteristics of Missionaries Today

Let me simply outline for you some characteristics of a missionary today. There are surely many others. I encourage you to supplement the list with your own reflections.
An international perspective, a global world view

Three signs, especially, will witness to global awareness in the Congregation.

A first, concrete sign of this awareness is the ability to respond to urgent needs throughout the world. Do not let provincial ties and provincial needs hold you back. When the needs of the Church are greater elsewhere, go with liberty.

A second sign of an international perspective in the Congregation is solidarity among the provinces. I urge you to cooperate with one another. This is already taking place through national and regional meetings of Visitors, but I especially want to encourage you to cooperate in regard to the formation of candidates and in regard to assistance to poorer provinces. There are some things that we can do much better together than separately. Moreover, those of us who are better off materially can surely be of great assistance to those who have less.

Thirdly, a healthy sign of global awareness in the Congregation will be the presence in the General Curia and on our various commissions of confreres of various races and from all continents. An international Congregation needs ties between the center and the provinces. As the provinces of the "Third Church" continue to grow, good communication with the center will be an utter necessity.

Mobility and spreading of the good news

The Church exists to evangelize, to proclaim that Jesus is Lord. So too does the Congregation. This means that the members of the Congregation will be agile, quick to move when new needs arise. Our love will be expansive, like a fire. We will want to tell others the good news that Jesus is alive and present.

I pose this question: Could every province of the Congregation of the Mission take on the responsibility for a mission outside its own territory? In addition, could the Congregation become more missionary not just territorially, but in the heart and will of its members, showing great flexibility in moving to wherever the needs of the poor cry out, both within one's province and outside?

One of the signs that the Congregation is filled with a mobile missionary spirit will be the willingness to relinquish works that are firmly
established, and which others can carry on, in order to free confreres for more pressing needs that others are unwilling or unable to meet.

**Flexibility**

The accent here is on a supple mentality in regard to evangelization. In a time of rapid change, rigidity is an enemy and flexibility an ally. For example, one of the most significant changes that has taken place in the Church since Vatican II is in the role of the laity. Today we are conscious more than ever that lay people have an essential role in announcing the good news. It is for that reason that our Constitutions call the priests and brothers of the Congregation not only to evangelize the poor as missionaries, but to form others—priests, brothers, sisters, lay men and women—to participate more fully in the evangelization of the poor (C 1). Are we flexible in accepting the important roles of lay men and women in evangelizing? Do we have the suppleness to co-operate harmoniously with them?

A greater pluralism in theological perspective and a greater variety in the plans for local community living also demand a flexible mentality. It is crucial that we have the flexibility to live and work with people of differing theological perspectives. In dialoguing and deciding about our local community plans, moreover, much give-and-take is essential.

**Foreign languages**

Saint Vincent asked, "How can missionaries go throughout the world announcing the Gospel if they know only their own language?" (SV XII, 26-27)

We are an international congregation. We labor in more than seventy countries. Missionary mobility demands that as many of our members as possible be bilingual.

**Inculturation**

There is always the danger that the ideas, the customs, even the building styles of one world will simply be transported to another. Our great missionaries, like Justin de Jacobis, recognized from the start that

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this is insufficient. The gospel must take root and blossom within the deepest values of each culture. At the same time, it must transform what is not of God within a culture and what violates the human person.

Karl Rahner points out that the globalization of theology is one of the greatest needs of the Church in the years ahead. He notes that up to the present there has been an unfortunate tendency to “canonize” what was really only a manifestation of the thought patterns of western culture.² Right now, many younger and growing provinces, and particularly those responsible for formation within them, face the difficult challenge of teaching philosophy and theology (so often formulated in a European context), while searching for new categories in an African, Asian or South American setting. Similarly, they search for the appropriate forms of expressing poverty, chastity, obedience, and life-long commitment to the poor within cultures very different not only from Saint Vincent’s, but also from those of the writers of most of the philosophy, theology, and spiritual reading books written up until recent times. In our service to the diocesan clergy, and in the formation of our own candidates, are we finding the means to present a truly inculturated theology and spirituality?

Along these same lines, the place of women in society and the social mores in relating to them vary greatly from North to South and, in both hemispheres, from continent to continent. To talk with a woman on the street may be as “natural” in Los Angeles as it is “scandalous” in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. The missionary must know the difference.

Listening for calls

A missionary seeks not his own will but the will of Him who sends him. He is ready to respond to the needs of his religious community and God’s people. The calls of God’s people are very important. Our own gifts and talents are too. Most modern religious communities attempt to fit calls to the gifts and talents of their individual members. In this context, it is important for every member of the Congregation to let himself be challenged. We must listen well, especially when we are tempted to seek our own security, to remain where we are. Often, responses to challenging calls draw forth from us resources whose existence we never dreamed of;

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not only do we serve those who are crying out for help, but we also find ourselves growing in the process.

**Continuous formation**

The Congregation must continue to emphasize, and find creative means for, integral formation on both initial and ongoing levels. Such integral formation has various aspects: human, spiritual, apostolic, Vincentian, biblical, theological, professional. On all levels, the person himself would be seen as the one primarily responsible for his own formation.

I encourage the provinces to be especially attentive to the formation of confreres in the early years *after* vows or ordination. Bring them together often to share their experiences. Offer them wise mentors. Help them build a deep spiritual foundation, a rootedness in God. It is only in this way that they will be fully alive and persevering in the evangelization of the poor.

**Creativity in defining missionary work**

Saint Vincent tells us: "Love is inventive to the point of infinity" (SV XI, 146). Over the years, I have admired many confreres for their inventiveness. Because they live in daily contact with the poor they are among the first to know their real needs. It will not be I, who am sitting behind a desk or visiting the provinces. It will not be sociologists or economists, who study the needs of the poor by examining the data they receive. The confreres who are front-line workers will know ahead of us, because the poor will tell them directly. I want to encourage all our missionaries to be inventive in the service of the needs that you discover. Pose the question individually and as a local community: What is this poor person asking of me concretely? What is the deepest need of the person listening to my homily? What is the refugee in a camp in Africa asking? What is the sick person in his or her home crying out for? What is the AIDS patient's acutest pain? Then be creative in ministering to their needs.

For a variety of reasons, particularly the shortage of vocations, in some countries our service in seminaries has been significantly reduced. An important challenge that lies before us as Vincentians is to find other creative means of assisting in the formation of the diocesan clergy in those circumstances.
Expertise in the social teaching of the Church

Pope John Paul II writes very forcefully in Centesimus Annus: "The 'new evangelization,' which the modern world urgently needs and which I have emphasized many times, must include among its essential elements a proclamation of the Church's social doctrine" (#5). The Church has been proclaiming this doctrine in a rather clear way now for more than one hundred years. Are Catholics really well evangelized in this regard? Is this social doctrine part of their explicit consciousness? I ask all Vincentians to become "experts" in teaching this social doctrine. As followers of Christ, the Evangelizer of the Poor, we must proclaim this aspect of the reign of God by our words and by our works. We must hold up before others the Church's rich teaching, its vision of a kingdom of justice, its denunciation of unjust social structures, its proclamation that the poor must, in every era, occupy a central place in the consciousness of Christians. In our formation work, with both clergy and laity, we must present this social teaching with both clarity and urgency.

Our mission will be truly prophetic today if we preach and teach the Church's social doctrine clearly. And like many prophets, we may perhaps suffer as we do so.

Being a man of God

Witness speaks more eloquently than words. Our lives inevitably say much more than our sermons.

For Vincent de Paul, there is only one driving force: the person of Jesus Christ. "Jesus Christ is the rule of the Mission" (SV XII, 130), he tells the members of the Congregation of the Mission, the center of their life and activity. "Remember, Father," he writes to Monsieur Portail, one of the original members of the Congregation, "that we live in Jesus Christ by the death of Jesus Christ, and that we ought to die in Jesus Christ by the life of Jesus Christ, and that our life ought to be hidden in Jesus Christ and full of Jesus Christ, and that in order to die like Jesus Christ it is necessary to live like Jesus Christ" (SV I, 295).

Vincent warns his followers that they will find true freedom only when Christ takes hold of them. He writes to Antoine Durand, the newly

6. Cf. also XI, 53: "Let us walk with assurance on the royal road on which Jesus Christ will be our guide and leader."
appointed superior of the seminary at Agde: "It is therefore essential for you, Father, to empty yourself in order to put on Jesus Christ" (SV XI, 343-44).

We fulfill our mission only if we follow Christ as the Evangelizer of the Poor and put on his spirit (C 1), if, as our Constitutions put it, we are holy.

Today, as in every era, the Church needs saints. It needs missionaries who are simple, humble, gentle, self-sacrificing, and filled with effective love. It needs preachers who radiate God’s presence. The great missionary is not so much a man whose words are beautiful as a man whose life is striking.

Let me state it very clearly: the missionary today must be holy. Unless he is a man of God, he will not be genuinely effective, nor is he likely to persevere.

It is not the loss of numbers that the Congregation must fear (in fact, our numbers are reasonably stable). It is not the loss of institutions. What we must really fear is the loss of fire in our hearts. What burns in the heart of the true missionary is a deep yearning, a longing to follow Christ as the Evangelizer of the Poor. The genuinely holy missionary presences Christ’s love. Others sense it in him. He could not hide it even if he wanted to.

To be a missionary—that is our calling. Breathe deeply, my brothers, of the missionary spirit that Saint Vincent inspired in the Congregation. Let it fill your minds and hearts. Then, go. “Go into the whole world and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mk 16:15).
Vincentian Formation in an African Context

My brothers, it is good that we are here. This is the first such meeting, on African soil, in the history of the Congregation. It is a sign of how important Africa has become in the life and the mission of the Company.

Some Factors Influencing What We Say and Do

Our context is very important. Saint Vincent loved Africa. He himself sent the first Missionaries here. But this huge continent is quite different in our day from the Africa he knew. Let me mention three factors that profoundly influence what we say and do today.

The shift from the North to the South

During the fifteen-year pontificate of Paul VI, a striking shift took place in the Church’s statistical center of gravity. Striking though it was, few actually noticed it. The turning point arrived in 1970: fifty-one percent of the Catholic population was living in the southern continents. By the year 2000, seventy percent of all Catholics will be in the southern hemisphere. Walbert Bühlmann calls this the “coming of the third Church.”

In an existential sense, Catholicism is becoming truly a “world-church,” as Karl Rahner pointed out on many occasions.

Many religious communities are experiencing this dramatically. In our own Congregation, for example, while there are few vocations in western

2. W. Bühlmann, The Church of the Future 4-5.
Europe and North America, where formerly they flourished, the Com-
pany is growing not only in Poland, but also in Ethiopia, Eritrea, Nigeria,
Zaire, Mozambique, Madagascar, the Philippines, India, Indonesia, Co-
lombia, Mexico, and Central America.

For the Congregation, the opportunities and the challenges are enor-
mous. The confreres from these countries enrich the Congregation with
their own cultures and religious traditions. They often, for example, bring
us an experience of life lived out continually in intimate contact with the
poor. Such provinces frequently have active, even thriving, programs for
ministerial formation among both the clergy and the laity. But they also
express two striking needs: 1) the need for trained personnel to carry on
the work of our own formation; 2) the need for further inculturation of
the gospel, so that the Christianity and culture might interact with one
another at a deeper level, both enriching and purifying each other. Rahner
points out that the globalization of theology is one of the greatest needs
of the Church in the years ahead. He notes that up to the present there has
been an unfortunate tendency to “canonize” what was really only a
manifestation of the thought patterns of western culture.5

First Synod of Bishops for Africa, Madagascar and the Islands

The Church has just celebrated the first special Synod of Bishops for
Africa, Madagascar and the Islands. Its focus was on “The Church in
Africa and her evangelizing mission toward the year 2000: ‘You will be
my witnesses’ (Acts 1:8),” under five subheadings: proclamation, incul-
turation, dialogue, justice and peace, and means of social communication.
It treated the inculturation of faith, women’s roles and status, and dialogue
with other churches, with Islam, and with traditional religions. It exam-
ned the roles of priests, religious, laity, families, African theologians,
catechists, and others. Both the meeting itself and the lively participation
of African representatives are a vivid sign of how deeply the Spirit of the
Lord breathes on this continent.

The synod sounded an eloquent call to communion and inculturation:
“It is the Church as family which manifests to the world the Spirit which
the Son sent from the Father so that there should be communion among
all. Jesus Christ, the only begotten and beloved Son, has come to save

every people and every individual human being. He has come to meet each person in the cultural path inherited from the ancestors. He travels with each person to throw light on his traditions and customs and to reveal to him that these are a prefiguration, distant but certain, of him, the new Adam, the elder of a multitude of brothers, which we are." Our purpose here is not to examine the conclusions of the synod in detail, though this will surely be one of the most important future agenda items for all of our provinces and missions here in Africa.

The pains of turmoil and violence

I cannot leave unmentioned today the pain that the world, the Church, and our own Vincentian family is experiencing here on this continent so rich in faith and varied cultures. Our own Vincentian Family shares in this pain and has suffered from violence, recently in Rwanda and Sierra Leone, and over the years in Burundi, Cameroon, Mozambique, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Zaire. But these are only the most dramatic examples. Overt or hidden structural violence ravages Africa. The synod reminded us that the Lord has given us two great gifts of the kingdom, which he is in person. These are justice and peace. It demanded greater justice between North and South. It called for an end to presenting Africa "in a ridiculous and insignificant light on the world scene after having brought about and maintained a structural inequality and while upholding unjust terms of trade!" It remembered the dozens of millions of refugees and displaced persons in Rwanda, Sudan, Mozambique, Angola, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and parts of Central Africa, and it called upon the United Nations to intervene in order to reestablish peace. It pleaded for a stop to arms sale or the flow of the instruments of violence from the northern hemisphere to the southern. It asked for a substantial, if not total, remission of the continent's debt. At the same time the synod encouraged the churches of Africa to examine their own conscience on the question of financial self-reliance and urged them to do everything to bring this about, particularly through transparent management and a simple lifestyle consonant with the poverty, even misery, of many of Africa's own people.8

7. Ibid., 7.
8. Ibid., 8.
Formation in Africa

Our own meeting focuses on formation in Africa, a topic that the synod too treated. The synod emphasizes several key elements in regard to formation:

1. It envisions the integral formation of people who are well-inserted in their milieu, and who witness therein to the kingdom which is to come.9

2. It states that this is to be done by means of evangelization and inculturation, of dialogue and involvement in justice and peace, as well as by means of a presence in the new culture constituted by the world of the mass media.10

3. It declares that programs and houses of formation, especially seminaries and novitiates, should reflect the concern manifested by the synod to see inculturation and the social teaching of the Church taken very seriously.11

4. It thanks God for the gift of vocations which are increasing everywhere in Africa but calls upon the Church in Africa to receive this gift with responsibility, being concerned with the quality of vocations, the discernment process in identifying them, and the setting up of criteria for admission, and the offering of a rich formation.12

5. It calls upon the Church to prepare formators well.13

6. It tells formators: "On the quality of your life and on your fidelity to your commitments depends the credibility of what you are teaching the seminarians and the success of the formation that you are giving them. If your intellectual competence is not put at the service of a holy life, you will be increasing in the Church the number of priest functionaries who will not give to the world the only reality that the world expects from them: God."14 Formators should be genuinely holy—role models for our students.

7. It tells religious: "You will succeed in inculturating religious life in Africa only by assuming, as it were, by representation and anticipation, the profound values that make up the life of our cultures and express the
end pursued by our peoples. In this way you will give spiritual hospitality to Christ, chaste, poor and obedient, who has come not to destroy but to fulfill."  

8. It tells seminarians: "Be convinced that spiritual formation is the key to the whole of your formation. An intense prayer life and a generous spiritual combat will enable you to properly discern your vocation and to grow as witnesses. . . ."  

It encourages them to strive after the simple lifestyle of laborers for the gospel in solidarity with the poor of the continent.

Vincentian Formation in Africa and Madagascar

What should seminary formation be like in Africa when the gospel and the Church are truly to be inculturated here? There is always the danger that the buildings and the ideas of another world will be simply transported to Africa. Our great missionaries, like Justin de Jacobis, recognized from the start that this is insufficient. The gospel must take root and blossom within the deepest values of African cultures. At the same time it must transform what is not of God and what violates the human person.

In each African country, there is a need for communion with the larger worldwide Vincentian family and, at the same time, genuine rootedness of the Congregation within Africa. Toward that end, formation is crucial.

Let me place before you a series of challenges, while being very conscious that you have already generously begun to labor at them.

1. I ask you, in dialogue with one another, to make real for our seminarians the five Vincentian virtues. We know what these virtues meant for Saint Vincent. There are many studies in that regard. What do they mean in an African context?

a. Simplicity involves communicating the truth as it is, without dissimulation. How can one best express here the core of Jesus' statement that our yes should mean yes and our no, no (Mt 5:37)? How can simplicity be expressed here? How do the relationships of the speaker and the listener (superiors, elders, the young) affect communication?

15. Ibid., § 58.
16. Ibid., § 60 and 61.
17. Ibid., § 61.
b. **Humility** for Saint Vincent involves a grateful recognition that all is gift. It involves a consciousness that we are God’s creatures, that we depend on him, upon one another, and upon the created reality around us. It involves an awareness that we are sinners too and that we need God’s forgiveness. How will this consciousness be expressed in the African context? What concrete forms will humility take?

c. **Meekness** entails gentleness, warmth in relating, non-violence. The Church has surely had little success in proclaiming that “the meek shall possess the land” (Mt 5:5) in Europe, Asia, and the Americas, as well as in Africa. What can be done to remedy this for the future? What can African formation do to wipe out strife, especially violence, for instance, between tribes?

d. **Mortification** involves renunciation of certain goods in order to pursue other more important ones which we have freely chosen. It involves disciplined labor in the service of the gospel. It involves the sacrifices necessary for keeping our commitments. What concrete forms should mortification take in Africa? What are the concrete areas in which seminarians should learn to become disciplined men?

e. **Zeal** is love that is on fire. It involves burning love for the person of the Lord and a “new ardor” for a “new evangelization.” It implies hard work, the attitude of a servant. Its enemies, Saint Vincent tells us, are sloth and indiscreet zeal. What forms do zeal and its enemies take in Africa at the dawn of a new millennium?

2. What is the concrete meaning of the Vincentian vows in Africa today?

   a. What are the challenges for living out the vow of poverty? How should it be lived out concretely in societies where families may make increasing demands on their sons, as they become better educated and take on a prestigious societal role? What constitutes a simple lifestyle in this context? How can we live in greater solidarity with the poor?

   b. **Celibacy** has its own particular challenges in Africa. Africa is not alone in this regard. Celibacy is difficult. Each culture in each part of the world has experienced struggles and trials as it labored to find the ways of living out this gospel value genuinely and with great simplicity. What are the obstacles to celibacy in each country? How should it be lived out concretely in a context where generativity is held in such high esteem?

   c. How does one live out dialogue and obedience concretely in a
context where authority structures have been traditionally different from those in other parts of the world? Where wisdom figures, like elders, play a very significant role? How can candidates be formed to express their views directly to superiors?

d. Saint Vincent regarded stability as a keystone in the life of the Congregation and as crucial for the service of the poor. What are the values within African society that support it? What are those that work against it?

3. Tribal structures, which play a very significant role in African societies, have the potential for mutual enrichment or for profound division. How will our formation programs help our candidates to recognize the richness of their various heritages, and those of others, while at the same time living out profoundly the deeper, more universal bonds that unite us as the people of God in the body of Christ and as members of the family of Saint Vincent? How can we avoid tribal rivalry and strife?

4. What form will community living take in Africa? What will be the structures of dialogue? How will our lifestyles and our houses give witness to the simplicity to which the gospels call us? What are the ways of living together as “brothers who love one another deeply” (CR VIII, 2)? What will our local community plans be like?

5. What are the most appropriate prayer-forms for Africa? The Church in Africa is already developing a liturgy that is well inculturated, with their own styles of prayer, of song, of dance, of symbols, of gestures. Are there ways too in which our community prayer spaces, as well as our prayer forms, can truly reflect the African culture? Mental prayer, for example, was very important to Saint Vincent. He proposed a method for meditating that flowed from the culture in which he lived. What are the methods that are most useful within the African culture, for listening to God, reflecting on his gifts to us, and speaking with him?

Formation is crucial. Our evangelizing mission in Africa depends on it. Our community life will be vital only if we are well formed as members of an African apostolic family. Our prayer will be genuine only if it takes forms that touch the African heart.

I place these challenges before you with great confidence. Our Congregation has a long, rich history in Africa. Many wonderful Missionaries
have come here and many of them are still here. Many generous young African candidates have entered our Company. This gives me reason for great confidence. I offer you these challenges today, because I trust that you will receive them with open hearts, with creativity, and with responsibility. The Church and the Congregation have a great future here in Africa. It lies in your hands and in your hearts.